

# An Innovative Development for Influence Studies

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**ABSTRACT.** Influence studies of the French school, as the most traditional methodology of comparative literature, is of pioneering significance to disciplinary establishment of comparative literature. Despite its great contributions to the founding and development of comparative literature, we cannot turn a blind eye to the deficiency of influence studies. Since influence studies, confined in the same single civilization, conceives of homogeneity as its basis of comparability and focuses on searching for the identity of the same origin, what it ignores is the complicated process of variation and the fact of variation when different literatures disseminate and influence each other. Therefore, variation studies of literary dissemination, as an innovative development for influence studies, focuses on heterogeneity and variability in empirical studies of literary influence. Based on specific cases, this paper analyzes the two levels of variation studies during the process of literary dissemination. This paper argues that only when both empirical studies and variation studies are incorporated into its research scope could influence studies be complete and comprehensive.

**KEYWORDS:** Influence studies, Variation theory, Variation studies of literary dissemination, Comparative literature

## 1. Introduction

Influence studies, as the most traditional methodology of comparative literature, focuses on positivism and homology with factual relations among literatures in different countries. In the 19th century, influence studies, advocated by French comparatists such as Fernand Baldensperger, Paul Van Tieghem, Jean-Marie Carré and Marius-Francois Guyard, formed a set of classical research paradigm of comparative literature. The purpose of influence studies is to seek homogeneity in two or three literatures by studying the “passing route” that consists of three parts: the beginning” (emitter), “the ending” (recipient), and “media” (transmitter), along which “influence” takes place. The Doxologie focuses on the route from the beginning to the ending, while the Crenologie vice versa. The Mesologie particularly focuses on media. These three aspects constitute the theoretical pillars of influence studies.

## 2. The Contributions and Defects of Influence Studies

At the turn of the 19th century and 20th century, the discipline of comparative literature was challenged by its first crisis. Benedetto Croce and many other scholars questioned the legitimacy of this discipline for the reason that “comparison”, as a basic research methodology, is not exclusive to comparative literature and it is impracticable to regard “comparison” as the foundation of a discipline. In order to solve this crisis, Van Tieghem, the theoretical founder of the French school, argued that the object of comparative literature is the relationship between literary works of different countries [1]. In his *La littérature comparée* (1931), he pointed out that the real characteristics of comparative literature, the same as the nature of all historical sciences, is to embrace a great number of possible facts of different origins, then fully explain each of them, and then enlarge the basis of knowledge in order to discover the causes of most effects. In brief, the word “comparative” should abandon its aesthetic value to get a scientific one [2]. Guyard further supported this argument, claiming that the essence of comparative literature studies is the history of international literary relations. If the research objects have no factual contacts, they do not belong to the sphere of comparative literature [3]. The French school emphasizes the scientific and empirical research, focuses on the significance of the “relations” between literatures of different countries, and forms the influence studies of comparative literature, thereby effectively resolving the disciplinary crisis of comparative literature.

The greatest contribution of influence studies lies in the fact that under the guidance of positivism, the French school established a set of rigorous theoretical system of comparative literature. With influence studies as the core, French comparatists opened up an independent research field for comparative literature and established the disciplinary legitimacy. By abandoning “comparison” while only focusing on the factual relations and impact between national

literatures, the French school chose to narrow the research scope and restrict the research field of comparative literature. As Professor Shunqing Cao argues, such a practice of the French school is not only a strategy to combat the outsiders' challenge of disciplinary legitimacy of comparative literature, but also the result of the insiders' self-reflection and pursuit of the scientific nature of comparative literature [4]. It is the abandonment of "comparison" while emphasis on "relations" that has laid a solid foundation for the definition and disciplinary theory of the French school and formed the most prominent and distinctive characteristics of the French school. The greatest achievement of the French school, undoubtedly, is that it marks the establishment of comparative literature as an independent discipline, which is of foundational significance and has influenced the development trend of later studies. Its rigorous empirical research paradigm is still of irreplaceable academic value.

Along with the development of comparative literature, however, the deficiency of the French school to narrow the discipline scope became increasingly serious, leading to the second crisis of comparative literature in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, American comparatists criticized that the French school emphasizes the positivism while removes the arbitrariness, focuses on the history of literary relationship while overlooks analogy studies without factual contacts, and concentrates on a clear scientism while abandons uncertain aesthetic values. Therefore, American scholars restated the crisis, declaring that literariness is the core of literary studies and comparative literature should return to comparison and give top priority to aesthetic feature and literariness. In 1958, René Wellek strongly objected to the methodology of the French school as "an artificial demarcation of subject matter, a mechanistic concept of sources and influences, motivation by cultural nationalism" [5]. Wellek attached great importance to the studies of literature as art, insisting that the abolition of art as a category is "deplorable in its consequences both for art itself and for the study of art and literature," so it is of paramount importance for literary studies to recognize the crucial role the art plays, and "return to its old task of understanding, explaining, and transmitting literature" [6]. The American school, from the perspective of literary aesthetics, restored the "comparison" that is discarded by the French school, and proposed parallel studies which is to focus on the comparative studies of the writers, literary works and literary phenomena of different nations without factual relations in order to discover the common law of literature development in the world and reveal the universality of human knowledge and culture.

Unfortunately, as the era of globalization has ushered in, it has coupled with another challenge for influence studies, unveiling its defect of seeking commonality. Despite the fact that the American school breaks the self-imposed barriers set by the French school, stepping out of the limitation of relations to seek the common aesthetics and law of literatures, both the French and American schools confine their research scope in the Euro-American civilization circle and regard homogeneity and homology as the comparability basis of comparative literature. What influence studies fail to recognize is the collisions and conflicts among different civilizations or literary systems in the process of literary influence and reception. In brief, the traditional influence studies turn a blind eye to the variation phenomenon that generally exists in the relationship of literary influence. It seems not valid to explain these variations by using the traditional influence studies.

### **3. Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination**

Variation Theory of Comparative Literature was proposed by Professor Shunqing Cao in 2005. Its definition is stated as follows: "On the basis of crossing and literariness, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is the study on variations of the literary phenomena of different countries with or without factual contact as well as the comparative study on the heterogeneity and variability of different literary expressions in the same subject area so as to achieve the goal of exploring the patterns of intrinsic differences and variability" [7]. According to Cao, heterogeneity and variability should also be given top priority, being considered as the comparability basis of comparative literature. Based on this theoretical framework, variation studies of literary dissemination is proposed, focusing on "the differences between the subjects that experience literary exchange and produce literary influence, focusing on factual variation in literary dissemination and interaction, and explores the deep causes, such as culture, society and recipients' psychology etc. behind factual influence, aiming at exploring heterogeneity and variability in the process of literary dissemination and integration" [8].

Different from the classical influence studies of the French school, variation studies of literary dissemination attempts to address the vexed problem in the field of comparative literature caused by the dispute between positivism and aesthetics in influence studies. When a literary work from one country travels into another, it, inevitably, would experience different cultural particularities, ideology and historical context, and consequently, meet the target readers who have different aesthetic receptions in the recipient country.

#### **3.1 The First Level of Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination**

Classical influence studies focus on positivistic relations of literatures in different countries. However, when a literature of one country travels into another, it is linguistic differences that have to be dealt with first. During the

process of cross-lingual translation, such factors as linguistic differences, translators' proficiency of target language and translators' own interpretation and understanding, as well as cultural filtering etc., are likely to cause linguistic variations, thus making it impossible for the translated text the same as the original text.

Take Howard Goldblatt's Chinese-English translation as an example. Howard Goldblatt, a famous American Sinologist, has successfully translated a considerable number of Chinese literatures into English, helping them be widely spread in the Anglophone world. The reason why Goldblatt's translation is widely accepted by the Westerners is that he adopts the translation strategy of domestication. As he puts it, the job of translation undertakes great responsibility, so "I have to be responsible for the authors, for the texts as well as for the readers...but most importantly, for the readers rather than the authors" [9]. Due to the cultural differences between China and the West, it seems unavoidable that readers' aesthetic standards and norms are quite different, so translators should give full consideration to the aesthetic expectations of the target readers and attempt to avoid the aesthetic conflicts caused by expressions that violate the target aesthetics in the process of translation.

Goldblatt's English translation *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet* is a vivid illustration of this argument. The original work <尘埃落定> is written in Chinese by A' Lai, a Chinese writer. It is worth mentioning that the title of this novel is not translated literally. Goldblatt's rendering is a kind of rewriting which has aroused controversy among the academia in China. Some scholars criticize his translation as diluting the historical narrative connotation that the original novel tries to convey by the title. Interestingly, in the original text, the title of the final chapter is the same as that of the novel "尘埃落定". Goldblatt uses the literal translation to the chapter heading, entitled as "The Dust Settles." Why are the titles of the novel and the final chapter identical in Chinese, but quite different in English? Why does Goldblatt make such variations? The reason is that Goldblatt takes full account of the readers' aesthetic expectations. He is proactive to meet the interests of American readers when translating. American readers, as Goldblatt concludes, are more interested in the topics such as sex, politics and detective stories [10]. "Red poppies" are an important element in the novel, the major storyline that propels the development of the whole story. The poppies, as a direct trigger that cause chieftain family to transform from prosperity to deterioration, bring great prosperity and much wealth to chieftain family; however, what they also bring is the degradation and destruction, resulting in the final revolution of Tibetan system and the war in Tibet. Besides, the poppies are a symbol of desire, which, according to the novel's description, arouse men's lust. So Goldblatt's translation endows more in-depth meaning of this word, in order to satisfy target readers' aesthetic expectations. In addition to the metaphor of temptation and desire, the red poppies also imply war and death in the West, thus guiding the Western readers to expect a novel about the themes of violence and death caused by desire and the changes of political system. The title *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet* gives the public such a first impression that more readers would be attracted by the English translated work.

### **3.2 The Second Level of Variation Studies of Literary Dissemination**

Traditional influence studies only focus on the import of a literature from one country to another and the central role of the "source of influence", i.e. the "emitter". However, variation studies of literary dissemination begin to recognize the significance of the literary selection, filtering, reformation and transformation of the recipient country to the foreign literature. The "recipient," as the other end of literary dissemination, does not just serve the purpose of being a foil of the "emitter." Rather, under the influence of subjective factors such as historical milieu, cultural background and aesthetic orientation, the "recipient" has the initiative and right to make choices with regard to their perception and reception of the text.

Compelling evidence could be seen from Hanshan, a Chinese poet in the Tang Dynasty. Hanshan is a lesser-known poet in China and his poems are rarely known, so that little information could be found in the historical records about him and his poems. However, Hanshan wins great popularity in the U. S. Since Hanshan's 24 poems, translated by Gary Snyder, were introduced in the U. S. in 1958, Hanshan has been revitalized in the West. In the U. S., Hanshan plays a more important role than other Chinese poets including Libai and Dufu, achieving a canonical status. Such a contrast of Hanshan mania in the West while Hanshan blank in his homeland is attributed to the variations and differences between American and Chinese reception.

In terms of the writing style, Hanshan's poems fail to conform to the mainstream literature in the Tang Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, metrical poetry is the mainstream and the orthodox aesthetics of Chinese classical literature pays great attention to use implicit, elegant and refined expressions with literary allusions. By contrast, in Hanshan's poems, there are slangs and oral vernaculars with no use of metrical patterns, tonal patterns, antithesis or allusions, so both the literati and the general public refuse to appreciate his poems.

In terms of the content, Hanshan's poems do not accord with Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism, making him stray away from the mainstream. However, his poems and its Oriental Zen culture were very popular in the U. S. from the 1950s to 1970s. The popularity of Hanshan poetry in the United States is closely related to the spiritual needs of young people at that time, especially the Beat Generation regards Han Shan as their Eastern soul mate, their spiritual idol and

the guardian of their soul, resulting in the canonization of Hanshan in the U. S. It can be seen that literary works travelling from one country to another, its literary influence is not invariable; rather, in the process of being received, the recipients will make creative changes to the object received according to their own situation. As a result, the original literature experiences variations during the process of literary dissemination.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The variation phenomenon during the process of literary communication and influence guides us to think about the profound significance of creative transformation in the influence and reception of literatures. On the basis of variation theory, variation studies of literary dissemination attempts to provide a new way for comparative literature to reflect on the heterogeneity and variability when literary works are widely spread in various countries. It seems reasonable to say that variation studies of literary dissemination, as a good complement, makes up for the defects of the conventional influence studies' blind pursuit of sameness and overemphasis on positivism. In fact, influence studies could be further divided into the studies of empirical influence (including Doxologie, Crenologie and Mesologie) and the studies of variation. By tracing the development of the theoretical construction of comparative literature, it might be observed that international literary relations are the integration and complementarity of the positivism and variation. Therefore, variation studies of literary dissemination, as an innovative development for the traditional influence studies, is beneficial to promote influence studies to step out of empirical research and begin to consider other non-empirical factors, such as aesthetics and variation. Not only does it help influence studies extend its traditional limited research scope to the field of heterogenous civilizations, it also reverses cultural conservatism and promotes the world literatures to blend and complement each other in the process of literary communication and influence.

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